

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do...

DSMC's Central Region Closes Soon, Leaving Behind More Than An Empty Classroom

PATTY PREDITH

“What?” “Really?” “How Come?” “Gee, where will we go now for more of your training courses?” These are just some of the questions being asked of me when they hear that the Defense Systems Management College (DSMC) Central Region in St. Louis, Mo., will be closing effective September 30, 1997. The last class will be ACQ 101, Fundamentals of Systems Acquisition Management Course, held in late August.

Why Close?

Due to the 1995 BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) initiatives, resulting in population shifts within the acquisition workforce, the Defense Acquisition University (DAU) and DSMC made the tough decision to close the Central Region in St. Louis. DAU,

working closely with DSMC, selected another site in close proximity to the acquisition workforce that would meet the increasing demand for acquisition courses and make them more accessible to acquisition professionals. The site chosen was Fort Monmouth, N.J., and on April 11, 1997, the new DSMC Mid-Atlantic Region opened for business. The new region is now the hub for over 10,000 Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) personnel located nearby at Picatinny Arsenal, Lakehurst Naval Air Warfare Center, and the Defense Personnel Support Center in Philadelphia.

In the Beginning

DSMC opened the St. Louis campus in January 1985, with Dr. Julius Hein as the regional director. He remained the director until his retirement in



ARCH SYMBOLIZING THE CITY OF ST. LOUIS, MO. — GATEWAY TO THE WEST AND HOME OF DSMC'S SOON-TO-CLOSE CENTRAL REGION.

DoD photo



JIM AND PATTY PREDITH (CENTER) PICTURED WITH STUDENTS FROM CENTRAL REGION'S NEXT-TO-LAST COURSE OFFERING — ACQUISITION WORKFORCE TEST AND EVALUATION COURSE. ALSO INCLUDED IN THE PHOTO ARE MEMBERS OF THE DSMC STAFF AND FACULTY.

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ARMY BRIG. GEN.
RICHARD A. BLACK,
DSMC COMMANDANT,
VISITED THE CENTRAL
REGION ON JULY 17 TO
OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZE
PATTY PREDITH FOR
HER MANAGEMENT OF
THE REGION PHASE-
DOWN. HE ALSO PRE-
SENTED HER SEVERAL
FAREWELL GIFTS FROM
THE COLLEGE.



very heavily staffed – Patty and myself.” Actually, the large, well-staffed “phantom” office and classrooms envisioned by the students paled in comparison to the very real and vast Central Region geographical area, which covered 22 states in the Midwest.

Early on, the director often visited the Midwestern states for consultation with the region’s DSMC customers. One of his foremost priorities was to update the various military commands, facilities, agencies, and defense industry customers on the acquisition courses offered at the Central Region, certification procedures, and entry requirements. In return, he received and acted on feedback as to what training the customers really desired.

With the passage of DAWIA in 1991, customers realized training would be a big need. Due to the mammoth number of students needing and wanting acquisition training, the Central Region enlarged its lone classroom to help accommodate larger class sizes. Often the customer would request that

September 1996. The opening of the region was precipitated by the demand for DSMC courses in the Midwestern part of the United States, and the impetus to save TDY cost expenditures incurred when sending students to the main campus at Fort Belvoir, Va., for resident instruction.

The Central Region staff consisted of the regional director and a regional management assistant, two offices,

one small workroom, and one classroom. In 1993, we acquired two more rooms that were turned into the student’s breakout room and refreshment/phone area. Dr. Hein always laughed when students came to class and couldn’t believe this regional office was run by just two people. They envisioned at least one large building with numerous classrooms and personnel. In his introduction to classes he’d always say, “The office is

Central Region conduct the classes at their installation, activity, or agency.

During that extremely busy time, there didn't seem to be enough hours in the day or weeks in the month to provide the training needed for those in the Central Region. The region class schedule was often full, with many courses taught back-to-back for up to 12 weeks at a time.

After a couple of years, we became acclimatized to students begging to get in classes, and eventually settled down to a more "even keel of madness." Local students would often come to me the morning a course would start in hopes of getting a "no show" seat. I remember the first days at registration for the short courses, particularly ACQ 101 and 201. I kept thinking, "Sure hope all the registered students on the roster show up — then I won't have to worry about the brawl over which one will get in due to a 'no show' space."

It's Nice to be Needed

I have often said of my position, "you might not have to know a lot about one thing, but you better know a little about everything." The students made me come to this realization. Considering that they are coming from all parts of the world, cultures, military services, and situations, and not being in their own work environment; I had to have the ability to, at the very least, help them find answers to their own, unique questions.

Actually, in many ways, the students taught me. I live on the Illinois side of the river, so I personally learned a great deal about the St. Louis area and our ATCOM [Aviation Troop Command] facility through needs of the students. I found a dental referral number; a check cashing shop down the street I never even knew existed; a great gyros sandwich restaurant; who you call when the ATM sucks up your card and keeps it while you're on TDY [if you could have only seen the look in his eyes]; the fastest route to the nearest hospital [for the man I took to



To be chosen one of the guests of honor at a ceremony honoring our country's men and women in the Marines was to be a part of something bigger than those of us gathered in the room. We were caught up in the heritage and spirit of our country's "proud but few" — truly an experience I will never forget.

the local health clinic, who was literally having a heart attack right before my eyes, and was transferred by ambulance the rest of the way to DePaul Hospital]; how long it takes for a package to be sent to Korea; where the best camera repair shop is in St. Louis; or in the words of Yul Brynner as the King of Siam, "etcetera, etcetera, etcetera."

My basic philosophy was to try and have the directions, maps, phone numbers, locations etc., available to the students before they arrived in St. Louis, or as soon as possible once class was in session. My goal was to minimize the anxiety of being in a new place and not knowing where to go or whom to call. I often thought about

what I would do if I was in their shoes — just what would I want and need to know about where I was going.

I definitely feel a great sense of accomplishment at the end of a class when a student stops by or drops a note to tell me that the class was very organized and efficient, and I provided them numerous sources of information to ease their stay away from home.

Lots of Laughs, A Few Tears

With so many students passing through our doors, I've seen and heard lots of funny and sad stories. Let me relate three memorable occasions. The first took place during an ACQ 201 class conducted at the Central Region for four weeks, a couple of years ago.

November 10th is the Marine Corps birthday. We had a couple of Marines — one active officer and one enlisted student. They were out-of-town students and had brought their dress uniforms for the much-anticipated and historic day. In fact, the officer also brought his sword just for the occasion. We had purchased a cake and decided on a small ceremony. The ranking Marine Corps student asked if there were any students, industry or government, who had been in the Marines so they could invite them to participate in the mini ceremony. Since there were none, the two began the ceremony, asking all students in the class to stand for the reading of General Lejuene's 13th Commandant's Message.

The two Marines told us that had they been at their home duty stations, a very impressive ceremony is usually conducted, with an additional reading of the present Commandant's message and other festivities. When it came time to cut the cake, the first two pieces normally go to the oldest and youngest as guests of honor. Inasmuch as Dr. Hein was on TDY that day, they asked me to be one of the guests of honor. In keeping with tradition, the first two pieces of cake were cut with the sword, and one passed to me as a guest of honor, after which everyone joined in the celebration.

For me personally, it was a profound experience of patriotism and pride, mingled with ceremony and tradition, that I will never forget. To be chosen one of the guests of honor at a ceremony honoring our country's men and women in the Marines was to be a part of something bigger than those of us gathered in the room. We were caught up in the heritage and spirit of our country's "proud but few" — truly an experience I will never forget. Nor will many others; we were absolutely riveted, with hardly a dry eye in the room.

Just about every weekly survey commented on the ceremony. In fact, the industry students were most impressed and stated they felt very honored to be part of the class to observe the tradition of honoring the Marine Corps Birthday.

In another class we had a Japanese Air Force major. He and another Japanese officer had been sent stateside for six months to enter a crash course in English and to take a number of American government training courses; our ACQ 201 was one of them. A week prior to the class start date, I had no classes and was in my office working. All of a sudden a soft voice said, "Excuse me. Is this where the acquisition courses are held?" After acknowledging that this was the right place, we started talking. The major had driven by car *all the way from California*, and was checking the location of the class, facility etc., before Monday so he wouldn't get lost or be late on the first day of class.

After a short time I realized that he had brought his family; a wife and a boy and girl, about 7 and 8. Just by chance, I happened to ask him where they were. When he replied, "Sitting outside on the bench," I told him without hesitation to bring them in. What a change of pace for a routine workday!

It really changes your perspective to view your workplace through the eyes of a child. There they were, two small,

excited little kids at a place where "Dad was going to go to school." Over a can of pop, they told me about their travels and their guinea pig, who was making the voyage with them.

My admiration for the man grew each day watching him in the course. He had his dictionary by his side on the table at all times. Often when students were on breaks, and before and after class, there he'd be — endlessly translating. I believe the plan had been for both Japanese officers to be in the same courses together during the six months in the states as backup to each other. However, it did not work out for this course offering. Not only was he in the states on crash training, he ended up alone in the class with no backup. He had to understand a new language, a new culture, and not only be tested on the material, but pass the course with a better-than-average score. To do less, in his culture, was unacceptable. The pressure on him must have been enormous — it was more than I could imagine myself undertaking.

The class really enjoyed his humor and candor. He even gave a small speech during the last week. He talked about how he joined the Japanese Air Force and what was expected of him. When he was done with ACQ 201, he was off to Boston for another adventure with his family.

I guess one of the most fun times we had in the class was when one student's wife was expecting their first child. At the time, the ACQ 101 course was ongoing. Because she was due any time, the student told the instructor that he was carrying a cell phone. Fortunately the student was local so the trip wouldn't be too far. The instructor was lecturing and the phone rang. By now, all the students knew the nature of the call, and out of courtesy [or more likely curiosity] became quite still and quiet. Turning a bit red, the student picked up his phone. It was like the E.F. Hutton commercial — all eyes were on him. From the back of the room came a piercing yell, "Bring

home a loaf of bread, Honey." The class could hardly contain themselves.

After a minute, our poor student and the object of all this good-natured derision, hung up the phone and embarrassingly said, "Sorry, false alarm." Nothing like having a class of 48 listen to your every word. As it turned out, she had the baby on the weekend when he was home.

It's Nearly Time to Lock the Doors

Thinking over the events I've related in this article brought to mind how fast the six years have gone by since I started with the Central Region. When our host command, ATCOM, was notified that they would be on a 1995 BRAC, I didn't really give it a second thought regarding our regional office. The number of students coming to St. Louis still seemed to be high. Since we were a tenant on the facility, and not actually a part of the BRAC, I could sit back and watch it all unfold in 1995. I never worried. Why? Because 1997 was an eternity away...or so it seemed.

As is usually the case, time rolls on faster than one expects or may want. Here it is 1997 already, and September is just around the corner. It has come quicker than I care to think about actually! I've been most fortunate to have been given the responsibility of managing DSMC in St. Louis through its final phase and affording the students and faculty a home away from home. With the luck of the Irish, I'll find a new job and take to it all my many experiences and lessons learned by the time the doors close.

Thank you DSMC for giving me a great experience!

Editor's Note: Married to Jim Predith, an ATCOM employee, Patty has three children: Colin, Ashley, and Hilary. In addition to looking for a new job, her future plans include visiting Colin who will be studying in Phoenix; visiting Ashley next year when she studies abroad in England; and enjoying Hilary's high school activities.